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McNamara's Question

Board met  
16 Aug 1967

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The Soviet Response

1. Our judgment concerning Soviet responses to the US action remains essentially what it was in May; namely that they would probably not counter US interdiction with their own naval forces or initiate a new crisis in another area (e.g., Berlin). We still think the most likely Soviet response would be to rely on rail transport across China to support Hanoi, and to accompany this course with vigorous political and propaganda action. The latter would be designed to condemn the US move in and outside the UN, to raise international alarm, and to convince the US that it was paying a very high political price for its actions and initiating a dangerous phase in its relations with the USSR.

2. While reaffirming this net judgment, we should note certain developments since May which may affect Soviet calculations. Chief among these is the Middle East crisis of June, which in the main constituted a setback for the USSR and its allies, and which has almost certainly made the Soviet leaders somewhat more sensitive about further challenges to their prestige -- particularly in the form of moves by the US against Soviet clients. We do not believe this sensitivity would impel the USSR to retaliate with the high risk actions discounted above, but their recent frustrations would probably cause them to mount an even more vigorous political and diplomatic campaign than

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they might previously have done. They may, for example, become even more non-cooperative concerning moves to settle Middle East problems; they would almost certainly pull back from even tentative agreement on the NPT; and their campaign in the UN might take an even more aggressive form designed to put the US in the dock as an aggressor interfering with international slipping.

3. Soviet calculations would be affected by the feasibility of relying on transport across China, and this too is a matter somewhat altered since last May. The Sino-Soviet dispute has worsened in the last few months. The growing chaos in China, and recent US bombing of the rail lines from China to North Vietnam raise some questions as to the feasibility of assured land transit across China. If the Soviets cannot obtain such assurances, their dilemma in trying to maintain support for Hanoi would be considerably sharpened. Even in such circumstances, we continue to think the odds are against their taking drastic measures, though there can be no guarantee that their response would be the cautious one. In any case, we have no reason to believe that transit across China would be blocked, and indeed effective interdiction of Haiphong would probably increase Chinese willingness to facilitate transit of Soviet military supplies.

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